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Trauma and Symbolic Violence – a 1st person perspective approach to meanings of sexualised coercion

BODIL PEDERSEN

Summary
Our understanding of 'reactions to trauma' is dominated by concepts like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The use of such concepts has been criticised but simultaneously integrated, in folk-psychology. Connecting emotional and cognitive processes as well as acts – such as in gendered practices – to praxis, and drawing on the concept of symbolic violence, this article contributes to their critique. In order to develop the analysis of difficulties victims may experience, they will be reconceptualised using critical psychological concepts such as 1st person perspectives and participation. The analysis seeks to undertake a discussion of personal meanings attributed to 'traumatisation'. It raises questions as to whether concepts of this kind and related practices may constitute symbolic violence and contribute to victimisation through processes of looping. Furthermore it aims to unfold an understanding inclusive of connections between societal practices, aspects of symbolic violence, and the conduct of lives. The analysis is based on an empirical study of victimisation through rape and other forms of sexualised coercion.

Keywords: *1st person perspectives, trauma, symbolic violence, rape, looping effects*

Introduction

The lines above from Hannah's poem express thoughts and feelings that most of us connect with having been subjected to sexualised coercion*FOOTNO-

TE_REF_1*. That this connection is not always as simple and linear as we may think, and why this is not so, is a turning point of this paper.

In 2002-2003 I was employed as a psychologist and researcher at Centre for Victims of Sexual Assault in Copenhagen (Sidenius & Pedersen 2004). Reviewing international literature, I found it to be vast and diverse. Some older publications conceptualise the consequences of sexualised coercion as a life crisis, and there is a body of psychoanalytic work as well (Ringel & Brandell 2011). But overall the concepts of *trauma* and of *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* dominate the field. Studies are rarely concerned with questions of agency, which are particularly precarious in victimology, or with questions of culture/society, (Salkvist & Pedersen 2008).

Furthermore, although women still dominate the Danish rape statistics, in it is generally assumed that gender equality has been achieved. Consequently national research rarely includes a gender perspective, nor other aspects of psychosocial conditions related to the phenomenon. In similarity with mainstream professional discourses as well as with folk psychology, research most commonly depicts sexualised coercion as an individual and particularly traumatic experience. The overwhelming impression left by dominant discourses is then that sexualised coercion is performed by deviant, pathological and criminal persons (Emmerson & Frosh 2001), is 'traumatising', and leaves anyone subjected to it in great and identical forms of distress. As exceptions to this widespread individualisation of the issue many feminist studies, mainly British and American, understand victimisation through sexualised coercion as a social question of gender. Yet, feminist or not, very few studies are based on the perspectives of women themselves, and, with a few notable exceptions, most also generalise unchallenged assumptions about the traumatising meanings of the events (Gavey 2005, Marecek 1999).

Conduct of Everyday Life and Symbolic Violence

In as much as it negates human rights of self-determination with regards to where, when, with whom, and what kind of sex I choose to have, sexualised coercion is without doubt violence and a crime, no matter who is subjected to it and what it means to them in particular. Yet recognising this does not exclude the necessity of raising new questions concerning our understanding of victimisation, questions of why sexualised coercion is committed, its links to societal

conditions, or even questions that may challenge the taken-for-granted associations with the concepts of trauma (Mardorossian 2002). Such questions must be explored by diverse disciplines, in theory as well as in practice (Marquard 1997).

As a contribution to the exploration of such questions, I examine the personal meanings of sexualised coercion from a social-psychological point of view. Taking 1st person perspectives as my starting point, instead 3rd person perspectives such as those exemplified in diagnostic categories (Danziger 1990, 1997, Schraube forthcoming) my endeavour is to explore some of the social and personal meanings of what we conceptualise as trauma and sexualised coercion. My theoretical basis is a critical theory of persons and their conduct of life. By critical theory I mean a theory that relates critically to theoretical approaches in an effort to indicate their weak points, but also to reconceptualise their insights. Furthermore, critical also implies linking personal suffering and difficulties to societal conditions for their conduct of life. Thus exploration of agency is at the core of this approach. As used here the concept of agency implies not only specific and personal reasons for, intentions with, and conditions for, conducting life. These conditions are seen as situated in time and place, e.g. as locally situated variations of common historical societal conditions (Dreier 2008, Holzkamp 1998, Nissen 2005). Thus concepts like contexts of actions, participation, situated perspectives and meanings become central in linking perspectives to historical societal conditions, among these to institutionalised dominant discourses and locally situated personal variations of such discourses. Using such concepts this approach permits an analytical embedding of 1st person perspectives on social phenomena in situated practices. It also permits an embedding of the complexities of the personal conduct of life and its meanings and consequences.

But this approach may fruitfully be supplemented with sociological theory. One sociological and theoretical concept is Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence. For reasons that will be elaborated in this article, I have chosen to explore the analytical possibilities of this concept when connected with a critical theory of subjects. According to Bourdieu, relations of physical and societal power are simultaneously expressed symbolically. But, although related to societal relations, such as economy and politics, symbols, symbolic distinctions and relations, like those produced in science, religion and education do not automatically or directly mirror societal power relations of the former kind. Conversely, symbolic relations

are relatively autonomous, concealing their dependence on other societal relations of power.

Acts of submission and obedience to all kinds of relations of power involve cognitive and emotional processes, forms and categories of perception, principles of vision and division (Bourdieu 1998, 53), as those that categorise persons with psychiatric/psychological classifications. As such, symbolic power is embedded in praxis through the practices of concrete persons, and contributes to them. It is constituted through processes of embodiment of classifications into personal standpoints and habits, frequently in the shape of tacit and pre-reflexive agreement with dominant meanings attributed to diverse aspects of life. In this way symbolic violence rests on the adjustments of the relationship between forms of subjectivity that are constitutive of the dominated and dominant (Bourdieu 1998, 121), as well as dependent on concrete and situated social structurations of domination. Such structurations may be institutional and institutionalised as in many aspects of the psy disciplines (Rose 1998).

Furthermore, Bourdieu designates the embodiment of gender inequality, in which he regards both men and women as 'willing' accomplices, as the paradigm of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1990, 19, 170). One aspect of the dynamics of symbolic violence is that 'dominated' ways of conducting life are almost always perceived, even by dominated subjects, from the limiting and reductive points of view of dominant perspectives (Bourdieu 1998, 9). As symbolic power relations, and symbolic violence connected to them, constitute concealed relations of violence seemingly not connected to other relations of power, it is a form of power/violence to which one may comply with 'grace'. Whereas refusal or even resistance to comply may engender reinforced symbolic violence (as in social marginalisation), and/or physical violence. An illustration of this is when women, although not wanting to do so, may tacitly subject themselves to intercourse, or do so under protest. Such events may not be designated as 'real rape' (Gavey 2005)*FOOTNOTE_REF_2*. Yet resistance, and sometimes equally non-resistance, may elicit physical violence, as in what we consider to be 'real rape'. Based on socially incorporated beliefs and expectations, symbolic violence thus extorts submission (Bourdieu 1998,103), in this case sexualised submission of women, infrequently perceived and condemned as such. Another effect of symbolic violence may be the transfiguration of domination and submission into affective

relations (Bourdieu 1998,102), as in marriages and other couple relationships involving severe restrictions in the lives of participants, or even forced intercourse and other relations of physical violence. A further example of symbolic violence may be when concepts, developed in the 3rd person perspectives of psy disciplines, disguise the social aspects of personal difficulties and suffering, especially when the understanding implied in such concepts becomes part of folk psychology and the self-understanding of persons in distress. It may then stand in the way of understanding difficulties as related to the conditions for one's conduct of life, and of their change.

Exploring the concept of trauma and the meanings of sexualised coercion I draw on this understanding of symbolic violence: a form of violence that is not necessarily expressed or enforced directly by physical violence, but embedded in concrete situated social practices and embodied by the subject. Its influence in smoothing over potential conflicts of interest in person's conduct of life, such as those between professionals and persons who seek help or gendered conflicts of interest, is not exclusively that it conceals conflicting interests. It is equally that, from the 1st person perspectives of men as well as of women, relations of power, including more evident and extreme practices such as subjecting women to sexualised coercion and reactions to them, may appear to be universal, natural and unavoidable. In consequence relations of power become implicit but nevertheless simultaneously known to all, although in warped and indiscernible forms.

Diagnostic Approach and Complexity Reduction

Connecting symbolic relations of power with dominant and dominating social practices, one may identify diverse relations of symbolic violence that are active in shaping the conduct of our lives and our self-perceptions.

In the case of the personal meanings of sexualised coercion there are at least two intersecting forms of relations at play: practices of the psy disciplines and gendered practices.

Firstly, let us examine aspects of how the psy complex*FOOTNOTE_REF_3* (Parker 2001) is involved in creating distinctions in the practical/symbolic meanings of overwhelming experiences such as sexualised coercion, which we understand as 'traumatising'. Bourdieu connects symbolic relations, as the ones involved in the psy complex, to markets (Bourdieu in Brunner 1996/2003,

114). This is thought-provoking as it reveals one aspect in the process of (symbolic) victimisation, which is often neglected. It is related to a multi-million dollar industry partially dependent on the catch-all concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (APA 2000, Linder 2004). Sales of tests, questionnaires, diagnostic instruments, treatment packages, and many jobs rely on its use. And to boot diagnosis and treatment of 'PTSD' has become an industry that has spread throughout the world, supporting the promotion of its use.

Although the diagnostic approach appears to be helpful, and definitely has furthered public recognition of the suffering of many, it implies aspects of symbolic violence. In the contested name of objectivity (Danziger 1990, 1977) it is assumed that 'trauma' and 'traumatic experiences' are the same to all people at all times and places, result in the same personal problems, and may thus be defined in disregard of its multiple and complex constellations of personal and cultural/societal meanings. This reductive approach detaches human suffering from situated personal, concrete and intentional participation in, and subjection to historical relations of power and domination. It constitutes a development of what has been termed 'natural kinds' that suggest absolute psychological priority, and as one may add biological priority, of personal phenomena. Categorisation into natural kinds may be subsumed under Bourdieu's concept of relations of symbolic violence. Instead, the use of what may be termed 'relevant kinds' is suggested. They could be understood as habitual and/or developed for a reason (Hacking 1999,128). An example of the use of natural kinds may be that, after experiencing violent and personally overwhelming events, acts, feelings and thoughts implying heightened and generalised social alertness may be used as one of several diagnostic criteria for PTSD. Alternatively, such acts may be recognised as developed for personal, context-related reasons, at times even as clearly conscious and intentional. Having been subjected to sexualised coercion by a stranger then emerges as a reason to be generally alert to signs of possible violence, even more so if sexual coercion has been perpetrated by an acquaintance or even a friend, as is most frequently the case.

Yet even the concept of relevant kinds and the use of such kinds in classifications of human thoughts, feelings and actions may lead us astray in our exploration of personal perspectives and meanings. They may, as do natural kinds, direct our attention in ways that contribute to unwarranted and unnecessary ge-

neralisations and reductive categorisations. Instead, what we may use are analytical concepts such as 'participation'. Opening up for situated complexities of personal meanings, concepts like this help us analytically connect 1st person perspectives to societal processes.

Generalisations and Looping Effects

Generalising is a part of research practice, as well as of practising psychology. Without it researchers and practitioners could not draw on each other's insights, and would seemingly continually have to start from scratch. Simultaneously, since all practices are codetermined by pre-existing discourses and practices, starting from scratch is an illusion. Consequently attempts at generalising should not be given up, but be informed by critical approaches grasping the complexities of personal meanings and reasons. Generalising in a 1st person perspective approach means, understanding and analysing diverse and specific personal perspectives as related – although in different and personal ways – to specifically situated versions of common conditions for the conduct of lives. Generalising in this way contributes to our insight into the complexities of personal perspectives and agency (Dreier 2006).

When studies of the meanings of sexualised coercion do not include women's 1st person perspectives on the conduct of their lives, the concepts, as well as the persons involved, are robbed of intentionality and agency (Pedersen 2008a and c, Salkvist & Pedersen 2006). Instead, dilemmas and difficulties are pathologised in reductive, privileged and dominant 3rd person perspectives of researchers and professional practitioners (Danziger 1990, 1997). This masks connections of their problems to gendered societal relations and to subjections of victimised persons as well as that of professionals to institutionalised and commercialised aspects of symbolic and practical violence connected to psy complexes. Doing so, it underpins dominant and gendered victim discourses (Ronkainen 2001). Thus it contributes to the victimisation of persons who are already victimised, such as women subjected to sexualised coercion and political refugees. They are seen as suffering from the 'inevitable' and pathologised consequences of naturalised events and reactions to them, as well as being in more or less inescapable need of professional help. In individualising and victim-blaming discourses they may even be blamed, and blame themselves, for not being cautious enough or not

having taken responsibility for their own safety. And when, additionally, in often well-intentioned attempts at freeing them from possible blame and self-blame, they are designated as mere victims and as traumatised, aspects of their personal reflections on agency concerning the events and their aftermaths may paradoxically be dismissed as irrelevant or even pathological.

Hacking discusses what he calls looping effects of classifying persons' 'deviances from normality', in such categories as PTSD and other diagnostic categories (Hacking 2001,160). His analysis and ensuing argument concerning such classifications is that they may contribute to the 'symptoms' they seem to describe, or even engender such self-conception and behaviour. Describing being exposed to sexualised coercion as an event that is more or less inevitably traumatising, and the relations of power and symbolic violence connected with this, may in fact – as we will see below – contribute to an understanding of one self and others that forms and reinforces so-called symptoms, e.g. the suffering of victims. Relations of symbolic violence generating looping effects may be involved in professional practices, as well as in other relations of everyday life. As a result, if one does not exhibit the symptoms of traumatisation one may be seen as not suffering in the right way, and/or to be called a liar.

Looping of symbolic and institutionalised aspects of victimisation emphasise conceptions of events conceived as traumatic as the *real, sole* and/or *primary* cause of suffering. Their concrete contexts and aftermaths are at best conceptualised as de-situated, complexity reductive, statistically generated abstract 'factors' aggravating naturalised 'psychological reactions' to trauma. These factors are seen as causes for less important secondary traumatisation. Instead, in an analytical, 1st person perspective approach, changing meanings in the aftermaths may be understood as contextualisation and re-contextualisation directly or indirectly related to events of coercion (Salkvist & Pedersen 2008), and at times as processes in which 'traumatisation' is primarily engendered.

Gendering Perspectives

Now, and secondly, let us return to questions of gender and symbolic violence. Ronkainen (2001) proposes the concept of *genderless gender* for individualising discursive practices that mask connections between gendered domination of women and certain discourses and practices. She constructs what may be seen as

a specification of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the domination of women as practices of symbolic violence.

An important point in Ronkainen's analysis is that, when processes of genderless gender are involved, and reminiscent of the use of natural kinds, women in general appear as natural victims. Physical and sexualised violence against them is not understood in its connection to gendered practices of domination and submission. Instead, when subjected to it, women like perpetrators, will be understood as exceptions from normality, as having particularly bad luck, as being especially weak and/or even pathological. Such discursive practices are supported by sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant individualisation, dramatisation as well as sexualisation of *RAPE* by the media and other public discursive practices. These practices may also be supported by professionals who describe sexualised coercion in such terms as 'the trauma over all traumas, the one you never get over'. In this sense the experience is discursively over-determined.

Furthermore, as suggested above, the event is frequently accompanied by victim- or 'woman-blaming' (Roche & Wood 2005). 1st person perspectives on sexualised coercion may then draw on over-determined discourses. This may be the case when women individualise the events and blame themselves, seeing themselves as damaged forever and feeling that they are in need of specific kinds of professional help, or when they do not experience emotions or thoughts commonly associated with 'trauma' and think they are not reacting correctly. When they do not find these discourses to be representative of their own experiences women may, depending on contexts, either choose not to talk about their difficulties and/or consciously and intentionally struggle with over-determined dominant discursive practices.

Yet as they, as well as more common societal discourses, are developed in, and mediated by, a diversity of situated societal and personal practices, 1st person perspectives and personal meanings are very diverse. For reasons related to their over-determination, public discourses are simultaneously impoverished by the absence of nuances present in 1st person perspectives. Because of possible stigmatisation as a victim of sexualised coercion the voices of those who have experienced such events are rarely heard. Being dramatised and being causes for stigmatisation, they are not openly spoken about. Seen from this angle, personal meanings of

events of coercion, sexualised as well as others, are additionally discursively under-determined.

In the conduct of lives of women over-determined discourses may therefore prevail over their own frailer under-determined experiences. In looping effects women may then perceive and interpret their feelings, thoughts and actions through individualising and stigmatising professional and folk psychological distinctions. Perceptions of themselves as heavily gendered pathologised victims, including the emotional dispositions that accompany them, risk being incapacitating. What is more, these approaches limit more concrete personal approaches to what they are experiencing, especially ones that are critical of gendered societal conditions. Thus their potentials for reflection and other aspects of agency become restricted (Johannson 2007). Consequently in the aftermaths of the psychosocial and physical violence of sexualised coercion, women may collaborate unwittingly in forms of symbolic and institutionalised violence, e.g. in their own victimisation.

'Doing gender' is a term coined by Butler (1993). Her conceptualisation of doing gender e.g. of agency does not fit quite comfortably with the theoretical approach adopted here. To elaborate on this question within the framework of this article would take us too far. But 'doing gender' is an inspiring concept that may be reinterpreted in the present approach. It suggests that gender, as well as gendered and gendering categories, are not simply essential natural kinds. They are embodied through personal participation in societal and historical discourses/practices to which we all contribute actively. Albeit we 'do' gender diversely, at diverse times participating in and across diverse gendered practices. It has diverse personal and situated meanings. When we comply to, attempt to negate or even change the personal and societal meanings of gender, we are relating to questions of gender. Although it often disappears from view in processes of genderless gender, sexualised coercion is obviously a gendered and gendering practice.

In the study on which this article is based, and working with a 1st person perspective approach, it seemed reasonable to understand many of the participant's problems as directly or indirectly connected to gendered meanings of social relations. One example of gendering are practices designating body and sexuality as essential to women's participation, identities and self-image (Cahill 2001), and sexualised coercion therefore as a particularly identity-damaging crime. Another example is that in accordance with late-modern Scandinavian perspectives on

gender and sexuality – seeing themselves as equal to men and free to choose the character of their relations to them – the young women did not expect that they *could* be exposed to sexualised coercion. Ignoring or negating gendered differences of conditions for their conduct of life may actually have contributed to their subjection to a gendered crime. Subsequent changes in personal perspectives on such phenomena as sexualisation of women in public spaces and in the media, are frequently (mis)interpreted as symptoms of traumatisation. From the perspectives of the women in this study they were newly developed and relevant perspectives unmasking symbolic and other relations of power and violence.

This was also the case for other changes in their gendered and sexual relations, and for their perspectives on these (Pedersen 2008b). The examples here are examples of processes of genderless gender at play. Significantly, the participants customarily or even exclusively expressed changes in their perspectives on gender and gendering during reflections connected to concluding interviews. One may assume that symbolic violence inherent in dominant discourses on gender relations and on traumatisation, co-determined the fragility of the expression of such and other reflections. Also questions that are considered political – like critically addressing gender – are considered inappropriate in mainstream psychological theory and practice (Callaghan 2005, Montero 2001).

Studying Traumatic Events

My interest in and analysis of the mechanisms of symbolic violence is evidently not exclusively based on theoretical deliberations and the meagre critical literature available on the subject. It was developed in and through the analysis of case reports from 40 series of consultations supplemented with 15 interviews with women at Centre for Victims of Sexual Assault in Copenhagen. Like most research mine is also based on accounts and deliberations of women who seek professional support. Yet, women who contacted the Centre did not consistently experience the events as traumatising. This is surprising in as much as they came for help and that it contradicts dominant trauma discourses.

Most empirical research into the meanings of violent and/or overwhelming events is conducted as surveys or interviews based on preconceptions of symptoms of traumatisation. This kind of inquiry, as in all symbolic and other forms of interaction, implies preconceptions of their subject. But some are more likely than

others to promote possibilities of presenting the diversified and complex reasons for feelings, thoughts and actions of 1st person perspectives. Including continuous personal reflections and deliberations on meanings of sexualised coercion as they emerged over time and place in the conduct of lives of participants is therefore a relatively unique aspect of the study informing this article. These 1st person perspectives indicate how, where and when, the difficulties and sufferings of the women were associated with and related to symbolic definitions and meanings embedded in diverse practices in which they took part – and were subjected to – in the aftermaths of coercion.

Suffering connected to being questioned by police and waiting for trial are aspects well known from other studies. But, in addition, not being believed, being treated and stigmatised as incapacitated victims or as irresponsible women, being stalked and threatened by perpetrators, being left by boyfriends, criticised by friends and relatives, excluded from studies, work and other social contexts that demand your engagement, at times resulting in severe economic difficulties and social isolation, characterised the experiences of many. Difficulties such as these, as well as others more or less specifically connected to gendered discourses and practices, as well as to specific aspects of personal lives, interacted in the difficulties and suffering of participants. When not analysed from a 1st person perspective the difficulties ensuing here from may, just like their changes in personal perspectives mentioned above, easily be understood in terms of symptoms of PTSD. But instead of 'natural kinds' what Hacking (2001) describes as relevant kinds, e.g. in this approach concepts relating experiences to concrete situations may so to speak, be more relevant to persons involved in psychological practices be they researchers, professionals or seeking help. In as much as they interacted within the personal conduct of life of the women, and at times even constituted aspects of vicious cycles reinforcing their different meanings (Pedersen & Stormhøj 2006), such problems as the ones described above had complex situated constellations of personal meanings.

In the beginning of their participation in therapy sessions every participant was asked what she was most worried about and needed to talk about. All except one of the 40 women replied: whom to tell about the experience. This strongly indicates the social meanings of the events. It points to these as essential aspects of the ongoing ascription of meanings in a continuous situated conduct of life,

and as reasons for distress. The meanings of the event are not static. Nor does the experience itself in the consultations with the women emerge as the core issue. Again and again they address difficulties like the ones described above, the distress they caused, and how to deal with them.

Changing Meanings in the Conduct of Life

One woman verbalised an aspect of the possible aftermaths described above by saying: *'… Things have happened to you that cannot be comprehended by your friends, and all of a sudden their interests are different from yours. And even when you sit there surrounded by friends and stuff, you can feel so alone. And it is weird to sit there surrounded by friends feeling lonely. Because they cannot, they cannot really understand what is going on with you… '* What she was referring to when saying things have happened to you, was not exclusively the event of coercion. It was, among many other difficulties, being stalked by the man in question (who belonged to an ethnic minority), being threatened, feeling her son threatened, and being admonished for letting the man into her house where the event had taken place. But although she, like the other participants of the study, used most of her session time to reflect on events in the aftermaths, this woman had great problems in coming to terms with the experience itself. The reasons for her special difficulties emerged quite quickly during her sessions. She had experienced coercion by a former boyfriend and was afraid that she looked like a 'typical rape victim'. Remarkably, the personal meanings of the 2nd event of victimisation did not seem to connect directly to the first event. Rather, it was mediated by embodied folk psychological and psy discourses about 'typical victim personalities' embedded in her conduct of life. This had been underscored by her GP commenting that what had happened was to be expected when associating with men from ethnic minorities.

As the event of coercion had taken place in her home it was difficult for her to escape being constantly reminded of it. She suspected that the perpetrator was armed, and she had been terrified that he would harm her son sleeping in the adjacent room. Furthermore, drawing on concepts from her studies in the health professions, she reflected on the potential personal harm of the event itself. She specifically drew on such concepts as trauma and traumatisation. On the one hand, reflecting that they did not quite properly fit her own experience, she was

critical of the standardising descriptions characteristic of such concepts. For a while and for this reason she chose to term the event coercion and not rape. On the other, she at times drew on psy concepts in judging the severity of harm done to her by the event of coercion. Addressing the severity she did again not only mean the event as such. However her perspective was characterised by a specific insistence on having suffered harm. This insistence seemed to be a justification of her rights to help, understanding and support, of which she had and expected little, as well as to her claim to the right to be angry with the perpetrator and people who did not understand or support her.

Though she used the term coercion for a while, she was the only woman in the study who ended up calling her experience rape. It was a term most of the women did not want to use. They rejected it because of its dominant, dramatic and often implicit connotations to passive victimhood, identity as victim, severe traumatisation (cp Gavey and Schmidt 2011) and even sexuality, connotations rarely corresponding to their experiences. They did not think they could be meaningfully applied to their own more complex and more or less distressing experiences of events of coercion and the time after. They were also connotations that they saw as worsening their distressing difficulties. But the woman in question used the connotations to underscore her moral judgement of the event and its severe meanings for her life and that of other women.

These symbolic processes illustrate among many other the double edge of looping effects and symbolic violence often connected to 3rd person perspective categories and categorisations. On the one hand such concepts may be personally adopted and help us all identify and recognise (in the double sense of the word) phenomena and personal suffering, as well as support claims to help. On the other, they may contribute to stigmatisation and reduce possibilities for understanding reasons for conduct of life as related to conditions for life. It may also make us miss out on the changes in meanings depending on place. The women quoted here described how what she felt varied according to the contexts in which she participated. When at work she felt effective, competent and at ease. When sitting at home working on an exam paper, like she had the day she experienced coercion, she invariably felt frightened and could not concentrate.

Another young participant was also a student of a health profession. Participating in group sessions for at Centre she commented on reductive generalisations

concerning victims of sexualised coercion by insisting: *'We have things in common. But we are also different.'* She, like most others participating in the study, did not wish to be seen and treated as A TRAUMATISED RAPE VICTIM (Pedersen 2008c). She wanted to stress that the women in the group had diverse experiences, lives and ways of conducting these lives. The event of coercion she experienced was itself much more violent than that experienced by the woman above, but for her it was central that she had suffered because of being *'…treated only as a victim…'* in a period following the event. 'I am still myself', she insisted.

Priority of the Aftermaths?

A young woman who participated in the study had also been subjected to sexualised coercion at the age of twelve. At the time she attended group therapy. Participants were told by the therapist that having had the same kind of experiences and problems the girls may recognise themselves in each other. Starting sessions of consultation at the Centre she, like the other women of the study, had been informed that she did not need to describe the event of coercion unless she wished to, since it had been recorded in their files at the medical examination on their arrival at the Centre. In an interview after having stopped attending consultations, she, like all other interviewees, was asked whether she wanted to add something to the interview, she replied: *'No…Oh yes… it was good that we didn't talk about it… what happened at the event you know…oh, but actually we did, but only when it was important'* (for the meanings of her current conduct of life). Her reply again indicates the embedding of the meanings of the events in the daily conduct of the lives. In addition and importantly, it also points to a practical priority of this ongoing life for the personal meanings of the events over time and place. Consequently it suggests the necessity of, at least at times and in some cases, allowing it priority in theory and practice (Salkvist and Pedersen 2008), a priority not included and not possible in a diagnostic cause and effect linking of event and symptoms.

Over time, consultations suggested that the women who suffered most and were in need of help over longer periods were those to whom the event had posed the greatest physical threat. But again this was not consistently so. Women whose general conditions for the conduct of life in the aftermaths were exceptionally difficult, like Hannah's – the young women who wrote the introductory

poem above – were generally most distressed and experiencing 'symptoms' described by PTSD. Again not everyone experienced these kinds of distress. When they did they had very diverse personal meanings, and could frequently be immediately and concretely linked to aspects of the conduct of their lives after coercion, such as the ones described earlier.

For an informative comparison one may read Brison's book 'Aftermath' (2002) in which she portrays the aftermath of her own experience of coercion. The book is a deeply relevant personal account of a series of great difficulties and distress. But it may be read in at least to ways. The first reading seems to draw attention to a generalised traumatising effect of sexualised coercion as a delimited event, as well as to relief stemming from diagnostisation/recognition. This is a reading in line with the mainstream classification of PTSD, as well as with the insistence of some theoreticians and practitioners on a more or less unequivocal traumatising effect of sexualized coercion, and on the necessity for psychological treatment (Marecek 1999).

In a somewhat contradictory fashion the book may also be read as a 1st person account of specific personal meanings of surviving an attack one's life, the lack of recognition of this, as well as of other situated personal difficulties and meanings in the aftermaths of sexualised coercion. Read in this way, it seems to point to looping effects of diagnostic concepts and other discourses on rape, and accordingly to alternative interpretations of the so-called primary and secondary effects of sexualised coercion.

Alternative interpretations are hinted at in Mardorossian's critique of some current thinking and practice in women's agencies (2002). Here she met women whose stories, from her standpoint as a feminist and a counsellor, simply did not fit discourses on the inescapability of traumatisation due to sexualised coercion. In connection with my project as well, but outside the Centre, quite a few women spoke to me of having been subjected to sexualised coercion. However they did not all experience personally serious problems ensuing from the event. In addition in the study women's emphasis on the meanings of contexts and aftermaths challenges de-situated 'cause and effect' notions implicit in abstract notions of trauma, as well as those of primary and secondary traumatisation (Pedersen 2008a). Interestingly, Hannah recaptured aspects of her experience over time in the following way: *'… I think maybe (the meanings of) the event of coercion itself*

lasted 30 percent of the time, and then all the rest 70'. Hence her experiences, as well as those of other women, question the notion that the event of sexualised coercion as such *invariably* is the primary cause of distress.

These empirical findings, as well as Mardorossian's and Gavey's work, supplemented with theoretical reflections as those presented in this article may contribute to explain why even women who contacted the Centre for help did not all experience what we commonly call traumatisation or PTSD. Nor did they invariably experience any other symptoms described by diverse other classifications, such as depression, which have been used to categorise experiences defined as traumatising. Meanwhile accounts like these, in some approaches, not be heard, not taken into account or not taken seriously. They could even be taken to indicate that trauma was being repressed and women in special need of professional treatment. Stressing 1st person perspectives researchers and practitioners risk being considered naïve and unprofessional. But does a 1st person perspective approach imply that we should refrain from interpretation? No, although it includes the voices of persons whose lives are being researched, the 1st person approach is essentially an analytic approach. It is not to be confused with an approach in which perspectives of participants are seen as their essential and real voices and as completely explanatory. Yet a 1st person perspective approach differs radically from mainstream approaches. In these the basic concepts are abstracted from 1st person perspectives, as these are understood to be subjective and therefore not scientific. The 1st person approach is an interpretive approach in which personal perspectives are analysed as mediated. In linking personal meanings of the conduct of life to conditions for this conduct, it examines the complexity of diversely linked personal and societal reasons for feelings, thoughts, meanings and action.

At the insistence of her boyfriend a young women contacted the Centre again several months after being subjected to coercion. She did so because, though having attended sessions immediately after the event, she now described her life as falling to pieces. She had isolated herself at home and become increasingly passive, dissatisfied and irritable, also with her boyfriend. She and especially her boyfriend were convinced that her difficulties were an effect of having experienced sexualised coercion. The course of her life after the event was clearly related to this. She was experiencing a lack of trust in people she did not know, a distrust

she had not experienced previously, and had for this reason given up her new job at a post office. Meanwhile the question was still whether her conduct of life at the time and her emotional evaluations of this life, could in any simple or straightforward fashion be understood to be caused directly by the event of coercion and ensuing Post-Traumatic Stress, depression or any other diagnostic category.

The difficulties she described were in many ways reminiscent of those persons who are out of work may describe. Conversations with her showed that she had failed to return to her university studies at the beginning of term. Discussing this, it turned out that before the event of coercion she had been considering whether to study at the university was what she wanted. Clearing up this issue central to her conduct of life, as well as other changes, some more directly related to the experience, such as a new perspective on the sexualisation of women and her use of alcoholic drinks (she had been drunk as the event took place), helped change the course of her conduct of life in a few sessions. Evaluating the consultation sessions she – without being asked to – remarked on this in her final interview. She explained that she had expected to have to talk about the event of coercion, and was initially therefore surprised and confused at my asking questions concerning her studies. But she saw this as very important in alleviating the distress and difficulties she had been experiencing. As she had wanted to put the event of coercion behind her, she had, during the first session with me, expressed reluctance about her boyfriend's suggestion that she contact the Centre. This reflection may in a trauma-oriented approach be understood as denial that must be dealt with through debriefing or other techniques. In a 1st person perspective approach her reflections were personally relevant in relation to dilemmas in her conduct of life at the time, and as such an important point of departure for common reflection involving the professional and the client.

Some Consequences for Therapy

A 1st person perspective approach to therapy involves exploring personal – not abstracted – reasons for conduct of life across time and place, as it is here that the personal meanings of experiences are developed. The above examples of common issues reflected on in consultations and interviews suggest aspects that are important to include in such an exploration in therapy and in help offered

in other contexts to persons exposed to sexualised coercion. They are also suggestive of the kind of issues to be dealt with in therapy in general: complex constellations of personal issues, dilemmas, feelings, thoughts and actions connected to persons' participation in the contexts of their lives.

In their efforts to be of help in therapy and counselling professionals, even when they use classifications such as PTSD, most often take the specific aspects of personal perspectives and experiences into account. Professionals, as the ones Linder (2004) describes, make efforts to overcome what they consider the inadequacy of diagnostic criteria. They develop personal experience-based understandings of 'trauma' in order to comprehend and relate to the diversity and specificity of problems and meanings ascribed to them by clients. This may be viewed as a lack of understanding of the solidity of diagnostic criteria and their importance in guiding therapy and equally as unscientific, ineffective or even unethical and damaging to persons in therapy. This critique emphasises positions and perspectives of professionals as the experts, prioritising them and thus delegating a position of power over the client and over the ways of giving and receiving help. It is a form of power that in some ways may be coercive and thus reminiscent of 'traumatic' events in which, although with very different intentions, coercion occurs. Yet for persons who have recently been subjected to coercion, such a position in therapy may in some instances duplicate their subjection to coercion.

Reductionist and expert-focused approaches have consequences for practitioners as well, in as much as they constrict their agency, and therefore their professional agency. It adds to the gap between theory and practice, in which, instead of drawing on experiences from practice to develop theoretical understanding, theoreticians develop theories and practitioners are expected to follow rules deduced here from (Dreier 2006). They may be reduced to developing instrumentalised techniques at categorising symptoms and following directions for interventions such as debriefing.

On the other hand taking departure in a 1st person perspective approach, diversity in reflections allowed by the practices of such professionals as Linder describes, emerges as a meaningful understanding of situated professional psychological practices, as practices concerned with the concrete and unique lives of persons and the relevance of their agency. Hence, using concepts like participation and contexts of practice to guide the common efforts at exploration of and reflec-

tion on clients' lives by professionals and persons seeking help may also enrich theoretical development. And although questions and reflections of professionals always co-construct answers, accounts and meanings some ways of asking questions and reflecting may enhance clients' possibilities for voicing their own perspectives and taking their lives into account.

As a consequence developing theory in practice and theory from practice requires one as a professional to not let oneself be guided single-mindedly by trauma talk or any other preconceived doctrine or practical technique. It requires one – in cooperation with clients – to explore the unique complexity of personal, common and situated reasons for their difficulties and distress. With clients whose perspectives are informed by dominant diagnosis and trauma discourses, it may imply exploring what this information means in their conduct of life.

Concerning distress connected to heavily gendered events such as sexualised coercion it may include exploring situated personal as well as societal meanings of gender. This is a very sensitive question. Unmasking the symbolic and practical violence involved in gendering may easily be taken to be an unprofessional and politicising approach to a practice that is most commonly understood as being practised from a neutral position and standpoint (Callaghan 2005, Montero 2001). Leaving this 'neutral' ground may be designated as a lack of professional ethics. It is also a reason why participants in this study were not presented with many opportunities to broach the issue in therapy. But refraining from doing so, I as a therapist contributed to the ongoing individualisation of difficulties following the many diverse kinds of overwhelming events, which sexualised coercion may be and become.

Aspects of therapy and other forms of psychological practice including a 1st person perspective approach may be helpful in establishing psychological practices in which power is not primarily delegated to professionals and to their perspectives. They may promote an understanding of oneself and one's conduct of life, as a client as well as a professional, that helps keep a focus on complexities in the effort to support agency by contextualising personal difficulties and distress. They can be practices that counteract the helplessness and identification involved in the looping effects and symbolic violence of 'natural kinds', which is widespread and promoted in folk psychology by their use in theoretical and professional practices. Furthermore the adopted approach points to the necessity of a critical community

psychology as well as to changes in general societal practices concerning gender, sexualisation, violence and the connections between them.

Conclusions

It is important to understand the criticism and approach presented here in no way seeks to demean the pain and suffering of persons exposed to sexualised coercion or other kinds of violent and/or overwhelming events. The concept of trauma and research done in this tradition has been important in putting such pain and suffering on public and research agendas. But the concepts of trauma and traumatisation have become part of dominant discourses on the meanings of events that may contribute to this pain and suffering. Furthermore, it may be critiqued for, at the exclusion of other aspects of personal experiences, reducing personal perspectives and experiences to symptoms fitting into a specific diagnosis and elevating this into scientific laws with predictive force. It is an *intentionally* reductive approach that often knowingly brackets the complexities of personal lives, which understands the category as a 'natural kind' e.g. as a general human phenomena independent of the diversity of meanings of lives in diverse contexts.

Instead of using reductive categorisations the approach of this article makes use of analytical concepts in guiding our attention to connections between agency of subjects and situated conditions for the conduct of life. Instead of being an intentionally complexity-reductive categorising approach it is intentionally complexity unfolding. As such, and with concepts that link persons with their practice, it seeks to grasp the diversity of personal experiences and lives. This diversity would in dominant approaches be explained by such concepts as personality, individual coping mechanism or resilience. But again such concepts are reductive and cause-and-effect oriented, overlooking the connectedness of emotionality, cognition, action, intentionality, agency, and life conditions in personal perspectives. As such they may even be seen as adding to psychologisation and individualisation.

Therefore the approach presented here is based on a 1st person perspective. It is proposed as an alternative to the simplification and 3rd person perspectives inherent in dominant diagnostic approaches. In relation to questions of 'traumatisation' a descriptive *and* analytic concept of symbolic violence, in which personal meanings of violent events is understood as mediated through personally reflected

complex participation in situated life, seems useful: firstly, it helps one to get a critical grip on institutionalised and everyday life processes that co-create what we conceptualise and objectify as trauma and traumatisation. Secondly, it does so because it helps us get a nuanced understanding of concrete personal meanings of experiences and reasons for thinking, feeling and acting as well as to connect these reasons to life conditions. Thirdly, in doing so, it deepens our understanding of why not all 'traumatic events' may be experienced as such by everybody. Fourthly, it helps us understand how victimisation and 'traumatisation' do not result from unique and delimited events, but are generated in connection with specific situated meanings related to personal conduct of lives over time and place. Fifthly, individualisation, naturalisation, pathologisation and victimisation may then be unmasked as institutionalised, dominant, dominating, gendered and gendering practices of symbolic, as well as connected to historical and cultural relations of power. And finally this kind of approach contributes to closing the gap between theory and practice in theory as well as in practice. In theory it points to ways of including and analysing the complexity of personal perspectives and experiences and understanding them as personally and psychologically practice-related. In psychological practices it may guide us in understanding the great variety of personal meanings that being subjected to apparently overwhelming experiences may have, without having to categorise persons who do not feel or behave in the dominantly expected way as repressed or in denial.

Summing up diverse relations of symbolic violence imbedded a. o. in folk psychology*FOOTNOTE_REF_4* may be seen as interconnected and informed by social sciences and other practices. All of these, being aspects of social conditions in which daily life is conducted, co-determine the personal and social meanings of 'traumatic events' for those subjected to it as well for professionals and others relating to them. No matter whether they accept and use aspects of what can be understood as symbolic violence or reject them, it is part of the dominant ways of understanding such events and as such co-construct their meanings. Yet in these social processes, what we may expect to be a 'traumatising experience' may not always fit dominant discourses and may fruitfully be understood in other ways. The symbolic violence inherent in dominant trauma-talk, has looping effects and may even blind us to other – but connected and severely agency restricting – social processes and their consequences. Embodied dominant discourses and

practices that seemingly facilitate the collaboration of men and women, boys and girls, through subjecting and victimising practices contribute to the difficulties of women exposed to sexualised coercion as well as to those of others exposed to diverse overwhelming experiences of subjection. Women may be additionally victimised by being designated by, as well as designating themselves and conducting their lives, in a way that is informed by gendered pathologising concepts that reduce them to mere victims, just as this may be so for persons in general. Here using the term 'in general' does not point to the symbolic violence of generalising psychologised characteristics and reactions seen as situated between the ears of individuals. Rather it points to symbolic violence as an aspect of common conditions for the conduct of life and its personal meanings. With this perspective, reasons for suffering are not primarily and exclusively located in minds. Instead suffering draws on the meanings of complex constellations of the conduct of personal and common societal aspects of lives. In order not to contribute to individualisation, psychological practice must let itself be informed by such aspects of lives.

Notes

1. When not referring to dominant discourses, I use the term 'sexualised coercion' instead of rape. I do so for several reason, some of which are: 1) That it does not differentiate between rape and attempted rape, and thus does not lean on a common assumption that rape is more 'traumatising' than attempted rape. 2) That dominant and public discourses on rape are often dramatising and exploited in media representations. And 3) that for this and other reasons many women I spoke to were critical of the term, especially when used in the constellation 'rape victims'. But it is important to note that, as sexual abuse in childhood is not immediately comparable to rape and attempted rape, my paper does not apply to this subject.

2. There are indications that this may be changing in Denmark.

3. Parker designates the network of theories and practices concerned with psychological governance and self-reflection in Western cultures the 'psy complex'.

4. Folk psychology (Brunner 1990) draws heavily on academic psychology and vice versa (Danziger 1990, Rose 1998) raising questions pertaining to the ethical and political obligations of the research community.

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